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TAMING THE BEAST
Bluebeard and Other Monsters

> Curiosity is a valuable trait. It will make the simians learn many things.
>
> —CLARENCE DAY, *This Simian World*

"OF ALL the irrational incidents of folk-tales," one anthropologist grumbles, "none is more irrational than that in which a human being is wedded to a beast." The erotic persecution of fairy-tale heroines by their fathers, another critic of fairy tales adds, may be "needlessly repulsive to the feelings of every European nation," but it at least appears to have its roots in a stage of civilization when marriage between a widowed father and his orphaned daughter was not necessarily taboo. That critic may not have his facts right, but he has asserted the principle correctly. Few would be prepared or, for that matter, would want to concede a factual basis for marriages between princesses and pigs, girls and bears, or peasant women and hedgehogs. Yet such couplings are prominent in fairy tales. That marriage vows are, in some cases, not exchanged until after a beast has been disenchanted does not diminish the oddity of such matches.[1]

As irrational as these tales may seem (even to an anthropologist), most collectors and interpreters of folklore have never had much trouble identifying their aims and messages. Take the case of the lessons afforded by the two most celebrated tales of beast marriages. In one, the heroine marries Bluebeard, a beast in all but the literal sense of the term; in the other, the heroine weds Beast, a beast in all but the figurative sense of the term. There is no lack of consensus, as we shall see, about the moral offered by each story. One warns us about curiosity and its consequences; the other alerts us to the dangers of disobedience. So we are told.

Let us look first at "Bluebeard," in the version formulated by Charles Perrault. In Perrault's tale, which was included in variant form in the Grimms' first edition but subsequently eliminated on the grounds that it showed too many signs of its French origins, the newly wed heroine learns from her husband that she may open everything, go anywhere, and do whatever she pleases. Under no circumstances, however, may she enter "the small room at the end of the long passage on the lower floor" (the directions could not be more explicit). Needless to say, the many attractions of Bluebeard's castle fail to divert the heroine's attention from the one "inconsequential" room, and she soon gives in to the temptation to unlock the forbidden chamber. To her horror, upon opening the door to the room, she sees a pool of clotted blood in which are reflected the corpses of Bluebeard's wives, each with her throat slashed. Overcome by terror, she makes the nearly fatal error of dropping the key into the pool of blood, thereby staining it and furnishing her husband with telltale evidence of her transgression. Rescue at the eleventh hour by her two brothers saves her from sharing the fate of Bluebeard's earlier victims.

The Grimms' version of this tale ("Fowler's Fowl") is no less grisly.[2] Their Bluebeard is a sinister magician who masquerades as a frail beggar in order to kidnap unsuspecting girls. To each he issues a key to the forbidden chamber and an egg that, on pain of death, must not be dropped. Only the youngest of three daughters succeeds in tricking the wizard by depositing the egg in a safe place before exploring the forbidden chamber. Her sisters drop their eggs when they come in view of a bloody basin filled with mutilated corpses. After deceiving the wizard, the heroine resurrects her slaughtered sisters by deftly reassembling their dismembered parts. She subsequently engineers the downfall and death of her betrothed. Unlike her French counterpart, she takes on the role of savior for her unhappy predecessors and through her own quick-wittedness escapes the fate of her sisters.

Perrault leaves no room for doubt about the lessons of "Bluebeard." He takes pains to present the character of his heroine in an unattractive light: she is so tormented by curiosity that she "rudely" leaves her guests to themselves. Then, in a most undignified manner, she hastens to the forbidden chamber, nearly breaking her neck as she races down the stairs. At the door, she reflects ever so briefly on the consequences of "disobedience" but fails to resist the "temptation" to open the door. Using the sledgehammer tactics adopted by many a writer of his generation, Perrault spelled out the tale's *moralité* in a coda to his text: "Curiosity . . . often brings with it serious regrets."[3] Rather than appending morals to their fairy tales and thereby creating the impression that self-conscious educators had tampered with their content, the Grimms deftly integrated character judgments and moralizing pronouncements into the body of their texts. The heroine of "Fowler's Fowl" does not come under fire for being curious, but one sister is described as "plagued by curiosity," and the other is "led astray by curiosity." That Wilhelm Grimm made the point about the evils of female curiosity becomes clear when we look at the first edition of the *Nursery and Household Tales*: not a word is said in that version about curiosity. In much the same way, the story of "Mary's Child" was turned by Wilhelm Grimm into an object lesson on the hazards of curiosity. The first version states only that the heroine is unable to curb her curiosity. The final version intensifies the desire to transgress. Curiosity "picks and gnaws" at the young girl, leaving her no peace.

Nearly every nineteenth-century printed version of "Bluebeard" singles out the heroine's curiosity as an especially undesirable trait. Ludwig Bechstein, whose *Book of German Fairy Tales (Deutsches Märchenbuch)* outsold the *Nursery and Household Tales* for many decades, saw to it that Bluebeard's wife found it hard to live happily ever after: "It took a long time before she was able to recover from the consequences of her curiosity." Still, folkloristic and quasi-folkloristic versions of "Bluebeard" remain, in comparison with literary versions, relatively restrained in their condemnation of the heroine's inability to suppress her curiosity. When the Grimms' romantic contemporary Ludwig Tieck, for example, dramatized the tale, he also framed one of the most severe indictments of the heroine's character. In his rendition, even Bluebeard's wife is appalled by her inability to resist temptation: "O curiosity," she declaims, "damned, scandalous curiosity! There's no greater sin than curiosity!" Her self-accusations are uttered in full view of the scene of carnage for which her husband bears responsibility. Bluebeard confirms his wife's appraisal of her high crimes (by contrast to his misdemeanors).

> Cursed curiosity! Because of it sin entered the innocent world, and even now it leads to crime. Ever since Eve was curious, every single one of her worthless daughters has been curious. . . . The woman who is curious cannot be faithful to her husband. The husband who has a curious wife is never for one moment of his life secure. . . . Curiosity has provoked the most horrifying murderous deeds.

This is surely a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Whether intentionally or not, Tieck revealed the extent to which both folkloric and literary recastings of "Bluebeard" blame the victim for the crimes of the villain. Sam Weller, faithful servant to Mr. Pickwick and eponym of the Wellerism, makes the same point in his characteristic succinct fashion: " 'I think he's the wictim of connubiality, as Blue Beard's domestic chaplain said, with a tear of pity, ven he buried him.' "[4]

Perrault's "Bluebeard," which stressed the heroine's curiosity even as it toned down her husband's barbaric crimes, must have guided the pens of many retellers of the tale. How else is one to explain the striking predictability of judgmental comments made by various narrators of "Bluebeard"? Even critics seem to speak with one voice in their commentaries on the tale. "Succumbing to temptation," one representative interpretation tells us, is the "sin of the Fall, the sin of Eve." It is hardly surprising to find Perrault's illustrators making the same connection, embroidering their portrayals of Bluebeard's wife with vignettes from Genesis (figure 15). One critic after another falls in line with the view that "Bluebeard" proclaims the inability of women to resist temptation and cautions against the perils of idle female curiosity. We will see that for Bluebeard's wife, as for Eve, that curiosity takes on a both cognitive and sexual dimension. Only occasionally has a reteller or critic of the tale recognized

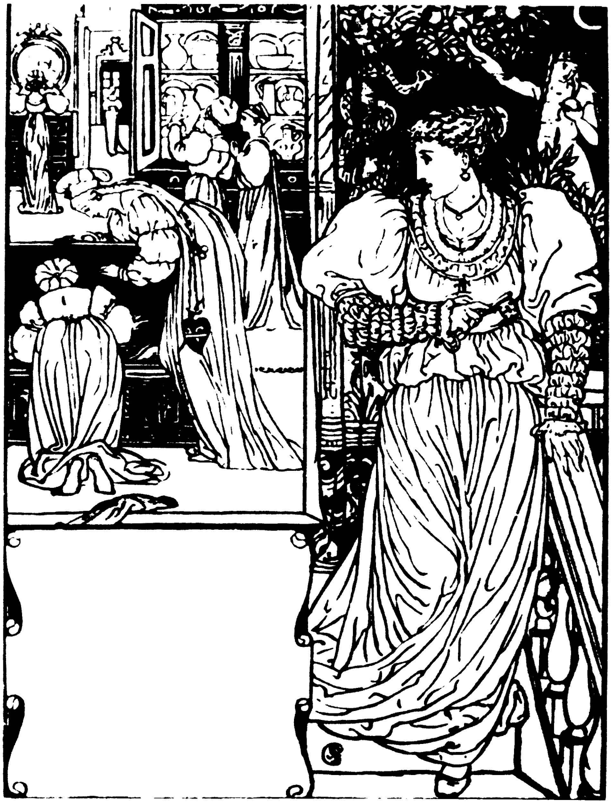

FIGURE 15. *As Bluebeard's wife steals away to the forbidden chamber, she leaves behind her curious female guests, who are opening chests, cupboards, and doors, and passes a tapestry showing Eve succumbing to temptation.*

that Bluebeard might be engaging his wife in a "charade of innocence and vice" or that obedience to Bluebeard's command might not be a virtue. A nineteenth-century Scottish version summarizes in its title the nearly collective critical wisdom of the past three centuries on this tale: "The Story of Bluebeard, or, the effects of female curiosity."[5]

Recent commentators on "Bluebeard" have also followed Perrault's lead and are equally uncharitable to the young bride. Cognitive curiosity, as we saw in the case of Tieck's "Ritter Blaubart," is turned with ease into sexual curiosity. Is it any wonder that Anatole France's "The Seven Wives of Bluebeard" attempts to rehabilitate Bluebeard and to explain the heroine's breakneck speed in rushing down the stairs to the forbidden chamber by revealing that there was nothing more behind the door than a handsome young man? In "Bluebeard" as in "Fowler's Fowl," Bruno Bettelheim sees a cautionary tale armed with the message: "Women, don't give in to your sexual curiosity; men, don't permit yourself to be carried away by your anger at being sexually betrayed." For Bettelheim, the blood-stained key that Bluebeard's wife is obliged to surrender to her husband clinches the argument that she has had "sexual relations" and symbolizes "marital infidelity." The same holds true for the bloody egg. For another reader, the stained key becomes a symbol of "defloration," revealing the heroine's sexual betrayal of her husband during his absence. For a third, the bespattered egg marks the heroine's irreversible loss of her virginity.[6]

What Bettelheim and others do with few hesitations, reservations, or second thoughts is to turn a tale depicting the most brutal kind of serial murders into a story about idle female curiosity and duplicity. These critics invite us to view the heroine's quite legitimate curiosity as a perversion (or at least as a serious peccadillo), one that brings in its wake "serious regrets." The genuinely murderous rages of Bluebeard and his folkloric cousins would presumably never have been aroused had it not been for the (symbolic) infidelity of his wives. As horrifying as those multiple crimes may be, they still do not succeed in deflecting attention from the heroine's single transgression. That transgression, like the opening of Pandora's box, functions as the chief source of evil. Strangely, the chamber of horrors tucked away in Bluebeard's castle—with its mutilated corpses and pools of blood—is neatly converted from the locus of Bluebeard's crimes into the site of his wife's curiosity and infidelity.

We need look no further than the illustrations to Bluebeard's story to confirm this odd fact. One edition after another draws our attention to one of two "key" scenes in the tale. Either we witness the arousal of curiosity (as in Gustave Doré's illustration to Perrault's "Bluebeard" [figure 16]) or we see the satisfaction of that urge (as in

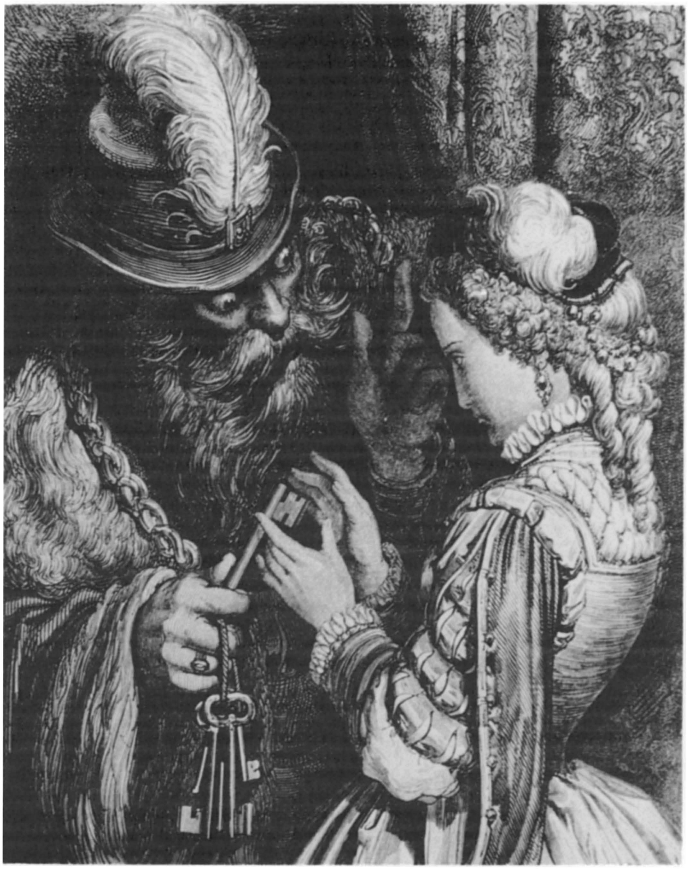

FIGURE 16. *Gustave Doré's masterful illustration for Perrault's "Bluebeard" is charged with obvious sexual overtones.*

Otto Brausewetter's pictorial narrative [figure 17]). It comes as no surprise that one illustrator after another perceived the handing over of the key as the central scene in the story. But it is odd that so many show us the heroine taking a peek behind the forbidden door or fleeing the forbidden chamber. Bluebeard's wife gets a good look at the roomful of corpses, but readers are generally spared the sight of the carnage. To be sure, illustrators of "children's literature" may not have been especially anxious to spotlight a scene of murder and

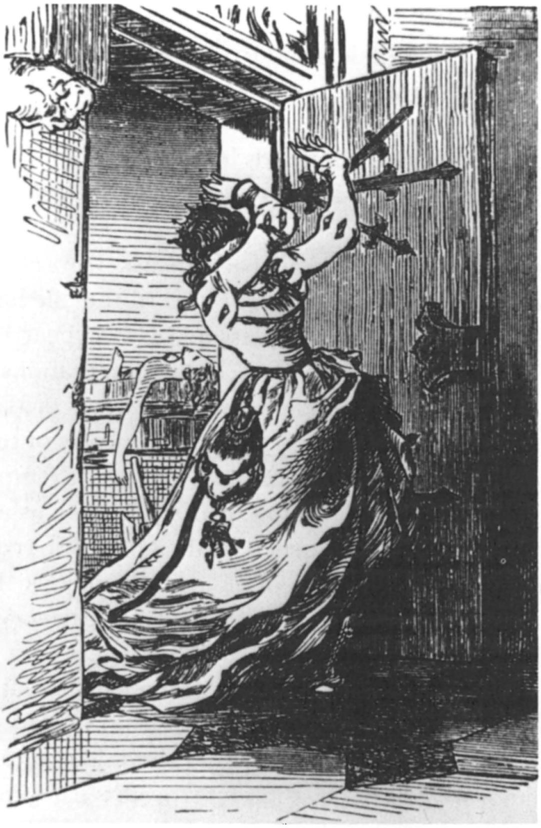

FIGURE 17. *Otto Brausewetter shows us the reaction of Bluebeard's wife to the scene of carnage behind the forbidden door.*

mutilation, but the persistence with which they focus on the heroine's curiosity and disobedience, while avoiding the depiction of Bluebeard's crimes, remains remarkable nonetheless.

That the folkloric and literary imagination would go to such lengths to create a cautionary tale warning women against curiosity (sexual or otherwise) seems odd. In "Bluebeard," there is a striking lack of congruity between the actual crime and its (near) punishment. Once the heroine commits what has been interpreted as the cardinal sin of curiosity, she becomes enmeshed in a sequence of events so dreadful that they bear virtually no relation to her original offense. To be sure, fairy tales tend to speak in hyperbolic terms, to inflate the hazards of a single false step, and to overstate the consequences of missed opportunities; but the heroine surely does not merit the monstrous fate that attends her act of opening the forbidden door. The bloodbath is simply too sensational a spectacle for so minor a transgression.

At this point, we need to step back to ask why Perrault, the Grimms, and virtually all other interpreters of the tale have gotten it so wrong. How is it that the stated lessons of "Bluebeard" so rarely square with the facts of the story? One of the observations that even the most casual reader of fairy tales soon makes concerns the moral dimensions of fairy-tale life. There are clearly plenty of times when virtue is rewarded just as evil is punished, and one is tempted to applaud Claude Brémond's definition of the fairy tale as a "morally edifying narrative which is governed by the optimistic requirement of a happy ending." But readers of almost any major collection of tales will discover that these stories also praise thievery, endorse gluttony, value cunning, and commend cheating. Lying and stealing are perfectly legitimate means for achieving social advancement. Yet over the centuries there has been no end to inscribing moral lessons on the tales by their rewriters and no end to decoding their hidden moral messages by their interpreters. In some cases, as with "Bluebeard," there is a clear consensus on what the tale seeks to impart. But often each recasting of a tale makes a different point, while every new interpretation seems to detect a hitherto undiscovered moral precept.

It can be amusing to observe the ways in which critics strain to find messages appropriate for children, especially when a text goes against the grain of conventional values. The hero of "The Golden Bird," for example, has no admirable qualities whatsoever. He kidnaps a princess against her will, steals his way to success, and repeatedly turns a deaf ear to sensible advice. Still, we learn from one critic that the story's "profound praise of placidity" teaches us "a calm acceptance of what ought to be astonishing." Another critic ventures the opinion that the tale extols the virtues of being "goodnatured and agreeable," but only "at the appropriate time," since those qualities do not *always* stand the hero in good stead. There is more than a touch of sophistry to these attempts to tease meaning out of the tale.[7]

But what about "Bluebeard"? How is it that everyone seems to agree on the wrong message for that tale type? To begin with, the prohibitions enunciated in "Bluebeard" and "Fowler's Fowl" command the reader's attention. Both prohibitions set the plot in motion by presenting themselves in the form of temptations that lead directly to their violation. The desire to transgress is only quickened in each case by the very nature of the prohibition's formulation. Whatever is forbidden arouses curiosity; all else is deemed unworthy of attention. The many richly appointed rooms in Bluebeard's castle, for example, hold no delight for the young bride. They are overshadowed by the presence of the single, remote, forbidden chamber.

Prohibition/violation: these paired functions stand as one of the fairy tale's most fundamental plot sequences. As soon as we learn about the dire consequences that will attend the mere touching of a spindle, we know that Briar Rose will somehow search out and find the only spindle left in her father's kingdom. When the dying monarch in "Faithful Johannes" tells his servant to show his son every room save "the last room on a long corridor, where the portrait of the Princess of the Golden Roof is hidden," it is almost certain that that particular room will be the only one to pique the curiosity of the young prince. The mother of the Goose Girl has only one word of advice to give her daughter on her journey to a foreign kingdom: to guard with care a snippet of white cloth stained with three drops of her mother's blood. Needless to say, the first event of consequence on the girl's journey is the loss of the cloth. In fairy tales, violations of prohibitions are the order of the day.

Fairy tales represent interdictions in all manner of forms. The most basic simply takes the shape of an explicit prohibition directed at the protagonist. The Virgin Mary tells the heroine of "Mary's Child" that she may open twelve doors in the kingdom of heaven but that the thirteenth is forbidden to her. Often the prohibition stands as a general, unwritten law in a kingdom. "The Gnome" recounts the misfortunes of three princesses who taste forbidden fruit in their father's garden. At times interdictions take concrete form, as in "Rapunzel," where the command not to stray is symbolized by imprisonment in a tower. Occasionally, fairy tales even invert the movement from interdiction to violation by substituting for it a command and its fulfillment. As Vladimir Propp has pointed out: "If children are urged to go out into the field or into the forest, the fulfillment of this command has the same consequences as does the violation of an interdiction not to go out into the forest or out into the field." If we reflect on the ways in which an interdiction ("Don't look into this one room") comes perilously close to a tantalizing proposal, then it quickly becomes clear just why the paired functions interdiction/violation and command/fulfillment are interchangeable.[8]

It is easy to take fairy tales that rely on the prohibition/violation sequence and turn them into cautionary tales. The prohibition is simply translated from the specific to the general ("Don't look into this room!" becomes "Don't be curious!"). What originally functioned as a motor of the plot and as a means of introducing villainy becomes a general behavioral guideline. That many prohibitions are issued by villains has not discouraged critics from revering them as universal truths. Bluebeard's command (which stems from a murderer's need to conceal the evidence of his crimes) is legitimized; his wife's curiosity becomes an emblem of women's weakness in the face of temptation. It is doubtful that anyone would, on careful reflection, advocate blind obedience to Bluebeard's command. Yet his injunction not to look into the forbidden chamber remains the most memorable part of the story and is repeatedly validated in morals about the evils of curiosity. That prohibition takes hold of our imaginations even more strongly than the visual horrors beyond the threshold of Bluebeard's door.

The prominence of the prohibition/violation sequence does not fully explain why the curiosity of Bluebeard's wife is so widely assailed. The hero of "Faithful Johannes," for example, is not satisfied with the many "treasures and magnificent rooms" of the palace he has inherited; he must gain access to the one door forbidden to him. As he tells his servant, "If I don't go in, I'm sure it will be the end of me. Day and night I shall have no peace until I've seen it." This is suspiciously close to curiosity, though it is never labeled as such. Prince Ivan in the Russian tale "Marya Morévna" also finds himself unable to restrain his curiosity about a forbidden chamber. "You must not look into the room that is bolted fast and sealed with tar," he is warned. "If you disobey me, you will bring misfortune upon us all."[9] But for Prince Ivan, as for the prince in "Faithful Johannes," the violation of a prohibition does not lead to punishment, rather it launches him on the road to wealth and marriage. Clearly there is a double standard at work here in the moral order of the fairy-tale world.

There are those who would argue that "Bluebeard" sits uneasily beside such classic fairy tales as "Faithful Johannes" and "Marya Morévna." But attempts to trace Bluebeard's ancestry to such bloodthirsty historical figures as Gilles de Rais (a fifteenth-century mass murderer of children) or to assert Perrault's invention of the figure have repeatedly misfired.[10] For a source, or perhaps no more than a parallel, to "Bluebeard," we must look to the East even as we remain in the world of fiction and fairy tales. Keeping in mind that Bluebeard is repeatedly depicted as a saber-wielding tyrant dressed in Oriental robes and outfitted with a turban, we do not have to look long or hard to find his kindred spirit. King Schahriyar, as anyone who has read an unexpurgated version of *The Thousand and One Nights* will recall, disposes of one wife after another because of the discovery of his wife's sexual curiosity. After catching his first wife *in flagrante delicto*, he resolves to behead each successive wife after one night of pleasure. Women's sexual curiosity calls for death sentences. By contrast, the woman (like Scheherazade) who is capable of arousing male curiosity, rather than succumbing to female curiosity, lives happily ever after. Scheherazade satisfies her husband and curbs his murderous policies because she is capable of arousing his curiosity by telling stories every night. Cognitive curiosity becomes difficult to distinguish from sexual curiosity in this tale: the printed texts in *The Thousand and One Nights* along with the presence of three sons bear witness to the continual arousal and satisfaction of both.

Whether the frame story of *The Thousand and One Nights* inspired

"Bluebeard" or contaminated it, or whether it simply stands as its Oriental counterpart, is not clear. But the story of King Schahriyar and Scheherazade gives us a pronounced example of the way in which cognitive curiosity can be wedded to sexual curiosity. More important, it launches a tradition in which female curiosity is castigated as the death principle whereas male curiosity is celebrated as a liberating, life-giving force. In light of this Oriental legacy, it becomes all the less remarkable that examples of female curiosity are repeatedly accompanied by moral glosses in fairy tales, while instances of male curiosity stand as gateways to the world of high adventure.

The example of Bruno Bettelheim has shown us that many an interpreter is prepared to accuse Bluebeard's wife of sexual curiosity and to indict her for sexual infidelity. Yet she does nothing more than open a door and discover the victims of her husband's crimes. Just what does she discover beyond the door? Are we entitled to assign a symbolic value to it, or should we remain on a literal level? To begin with, it may be useful to look at another text that features curious heroines and a forbidden chamber. The Rumanian story known as "The Enchanted Pig" opens with a king's injunction to his three daughters. His formulation is strikingly similar to that of Bluebeard: "You may walk in the garden, and you may go into all the rooms in the palace except the room at the back in the right-hand corner."[11] With each passing day the daughters grow ever more restive until they can restrain themselves no longer. "Why should we not go into the room that our father forbade us to enter?" they protest in chorus. With some trepidation, they cross the threshold to discover a book that reveals the secrets of their prospective marriages. Time and again, the knowledge hidden behind the locked doors of fairy tales is carnal in the literal or figurative sense of the term. In light of these associations, Perrault's warning to children to defer curiosity does not seem quite so far off target.[12]

In "Bluebeard," the heroine is confronted with carnal knowledge in its most literal form. The visual horrors beyond the threshold are so terrifying that they defy pictorial depiction. The heroine's discovery of Bluebeard's dreadful secret might, as has been proposed, have something to do with a child's suspicions that adults have "terrible sexual secrets."[13] We do not have to reflect long and hard on the key ingredients to Perrault's story and to the Grimms' recasting of it to realize that intense curiosity, locked doors, and the perception of sadistic brutality set up a chain of interesting associations—associations linked to the primal scene. Bluebeard's chamber, with its terrifying display of carnality, could be said to give vivid shape to what children perceive as the nightmarish aspects of human sexuality. But the carnage that meets the heroine's eyes could just as well be viewed as a horrifying emblem of human mortality, in which case the story might give us the heroine's recognition of death.[14] Still, psychosexual readings of "Bluebeard" have the special advantage of motivating the weighty consequences of the heroine's curiosity: the punishment of beheading conforms perfectly to the psycho-logic of the text. Whether we read "Bluebeard" at a literal level as an encounter with death or at a symbolic level as a story concerned with the discovery of carnal knowledge, it displays a special capacity to magnify and dramatize the most profoundly disturbing facts and fantasies of a child's mental world.

The chain of associations linking carnage to carnality and to carnal knowledge is far less pronounced in the Grimms' variations on tales featuring chambers that serve as the site of matters both forbidding and forbidden. Only "Bluebeard," the story that the Grimms perceived as too close a cousin of Perrault's tale to include in their second edition of the *Nursery and Household Tales*, and (to a lesser extent) "Fowler's Fowl" elicit the same associations. "Mary's Child," by substituting the Virgin Mary for Bluebeard and the Trinity for the bloodbath behind the door, becomes a straightforward cautionary tale about the hazards of excessive curiosity. That the Virgin Mary could slip with ease into the functional slot occupied by Bluebeard is telling and does much to explain why it became easy for rewriters and critics of the tale type to let Bluebeard off the hook. In "Mary's Child," the heroine is too curious for her own good and escapes death only by admitting her "sin" and implicitly expressing remorse for it.

The Grimms' other stories of forbidden chambers and underground hiding places show us heroines whose curiosity enables them to realize that they must outwit the villainous bridegrooms who try to trap them into marriage. "The Castle of Murder," which appeared only in the first edition of the *Nursery and Household Tales*, shows us an intrepid heroine who ultimately defeats her wealthy, aristocratic husband. The heroine of "The Robber Bridegroom" shows the same kind of courage but is also wise enough to be suspicious of her prospective groom. What that tale recommends is perhaps best summed up in the advice given to the heroine of the British tale "Mr. Fox": "Be bold, be bold, but not too bold, / Lest that your heart's blood should run cold."[15] The rich ambiguities attending the curiosity of Bluebeard's wife in Perrault's tale are sorted out and funneled into two separate tale types by the Grimms. In the one, curiosity is self-defeating; in the other it is paired with intelligence to prove lifesaving.

The French Bluebeard is a bloodthirsty aristocrat; his German counterparts are a bandit in one tale, a wizard in another, and a rich gentleman in a third. Russian and Scandinavian variants of this particular tale type cast an animal in the role of villain.[16] As Andrew Lang has declared, the "metamorphosis of men into animals and animals into men is as common in household tales as a sprained ankle is in modern novels."[17] But despite the profusion of transformations and the ease with which men slip into the role of beasts, there surely is a deeper significance to these metamorphoses, to the seeming interchangeability of man and beast. To begin with, it is important to note that men such as Bluebeard and monsters such as Beast fulfill the same paradigmatic function and are virtually all bridegrooms. The central female figures of the tales in which they appear are, therefore, either newlyweds or girls about to enter the state of (in this case) unholy matrimony. Often they have been coerced into marriage by a father who has frivolously promised to hand over the first living thing that meets him on his arrival home or who seeks financial gain through the favorable marriage of his daughter.[18] Is it any wonder, then, that the heroines perceive their grooms and husbands as beasts and monsters? Fairy tales, after all, are notoriously "hero-centric": figures and events in the tale are all presented from the perspective of the central figure, in this case the heroine, who sees in her husband-to-be nothing but the incarnation of bestial impulses, a creature capable of violent mutilation and murder. Oddly enough, it is generally the human bridegrooms who indulge in shockingly uncivilized behavior and remain unrepentant to the bitter end. Their bestial counterparts, by contrast, are models of decorum and dignity. A ferocious or repugnant countenance can prove wholly misleading in fairy tales. Contrary to the conventional wisdom about fairy-tale appearances, physical ugliness is not necessarily a sign of moral deformity; it can throw moral beauty or other merits and distinctions into sharp relief.

If Bluebeard and his international clansmen show us that men can be like beasts, tales such as "The Frog King," "The Lilting, Leaping Lark," "Hans My Hedgehog," and "The Old Woman in the Forest" show us men as real beasts. What remains on a metaphorical level in one tale type takes on concrete reality in another. "Bluebeard," as we have seen, has repeatedly been read as a tale about curiosity and its consequences. But with its emphasis on forbidden chambers, its movement from curiosity to revulsion, its focus on the "spectacular" moment rather than on the actual act of violence and violation, it is more likely to be addressing fears about violence, death, and sexuality. The heroine's discovery that even the most exalted and noble personage can prove capable of beastlike behavior stands as the central horror of the tale.

Like "Bluebeard," stories about animal grooms have been provided with plentiful moral glosses. A girl makes the mistake of promising a frog anything he wants in return for a small favor, and her story turns into an object lesson on the importance of keeping promises. "When you make a promise, you must keep it," her father declares when she trembles at the prospect of letting the creature into the house. "He helped you when you were in trouble and you mustn't despise him now," he adds when she balks at the idea of letting the frog sleep in her bed. When a man allows himself to be persuaded to give to a lion the first creature he meets on his return home, his daughter (who rushes to greet him on his arrival) reminds *him*: "If you've made a promise you must keep it." In "Hans My

Hedgehog," deep humiliation and disgrace attend a girl's failure to keep her father's promise to marry the hero named in the story's title. The brides in stories of animal grooms often are further tested with prohibitions against looking at their husbands under certain conditions. Like the heroine of "Cupid and Psyche," they rarely can resist the temptation to shed light on the forbidden. Failure to heed the advice of an animal groom becomes the whetstone on which the tales' critics grind their moralizing axes. Here again, both those who have recorded the tales and those who interpret them have had no trouble reaching agreement on messages just as they all seem to conspire in disregarding the implications of what the heroine must face.[19] Tales such as "The Frog King," where the prospective marriage partner takes the shape of a beast, are more likely to be concerned with the anxiety and revulsion a child feels at the prospect of maturity and sexuality than to be offering meditations on the hazards of disobedience.

Tales in the animal-groom cycle often appear in truncated versions, but the full structure of the tale type appears virtually intact in Mme Leprince de Beaumont's "Beauty and the Beast" and in its German counterpart "The Lilting, Leaping Lark." In both stories, a father with three daughters plans a trip and, before leaving, takes requests from the girls for gifts. The youngest and most beautiful of the three makes the most modest request. In Mme de Beaumont's tale, Beauty asks for nothing more than a rose; in the Grimms' story, the heroine scorns pearls and diamonds for a "lilting, leaping lark." On the homeward leg of the journey, each father succeeds in acquiring the desired object, but only after inadvertently trespassing on the grounds of a prince imprisoned in the body of a beast. The two fathers narrowly escape death, and each ultimately surrenders his youngest daughter to the beast.

Up to this point in both stories, the plot focuses on the encounter between father and beast, between a figure who embodies paternal authority in its benevolent form and a figure who, despite the absence of epithets attached to him, must be seen as the very incarnation of coercive rage and violence. (In variant forms of this preliminary episode, the devil himself serves as a functional equivalent of the beast.) Both Beast in the French version and the lion in the German are less than reasonable when they apprehend the paternal poachers. "Ungrateful wretch," Beast roars when he catches Beauty's father in the act of plucking a rose. "You shall pay for this with your life! I give you fifteen minutes to make your peace with heaven."[20] The lion in the Grimms' tale flies into a rage when he nabs the would-be thief of his lark. "Nothing can save you," he bellows in his fury. The contrast between the civilized face of paternal good will and the savage visage of beastly malice could not be more strikingly marked than in this single dramatic encounter. In tales of animal grooms, father figures invariably personify the sweet voice of reason, wisdom, and prudence. Paternal authority is dressed in the most favorable possible colors.

But things are not always what they seem in fairy tales, which have a way of concealing their complexity on the very surface of things. The "civilized" fathers of tales in the animal-groom cycle end by delivering their daughters up to a ferocious beast in order to save their own lives. Beasts, in turn, are not quite so savage as they appear at first blush. Mme de Beaumont's Beauty, whose views are admittedly colored more by eighteenth-century cynicism about the nobility than by folk wisdom, tells Beast: "There are many men who make worse monsters than you, and I prefer you, notwithstanding your looks, to those who under the semblance of men hide false, corrupt, and ungrateful hearts."[21] The "fierce lion" of "The Lilting, Leaping Lark" turns out to be the most well-bred and mild-mannered king of beasts. Even the repulsive-looking frog-king comports himself in a way that runs counter to his appearance. Except for his petulant insistence on joining the princess in bed, he remains a perfect gentleman.

If the first phase of animal-groom tales is marked by the opposition civilized/savage and the movement toward its inversion, the second phase of the action plots the heroine's response to the double nature of the prince/beast figure. In many tales, the female protagonist quickly recognizes the humane qualities of her captor and comes to value them more highly than external appearances.[22] Love, with its power to civilize even the most barbaric monster, disenchants the prince and restores him to his human condition. As folk wisdom tells us, love conquers all. Yet not all tales of bridegrooms bound by a spell unfold in so harmonious a fashion, with love proving stronger than curses and various forms of bewitchment. Kisses and tears (with their power to symbolize passion and compassion) often release a beast from his enchanted condition, but decapitation and other acts of violence can prove equally effective. In "The Three Little Birds," the young heroine and her two brothers encounter a large black dog: "When they struck it in the face, it turned into a handsome prince." The fairy-tale heroine who reacts with aversion, loathing, or anger to the beastly nature of her prospective spouse is no less likely to effect a magical transformation than her tenderly affectionate or compassionate counterpart.

That the two possible responses (tenderness/aggression) to animal grooms correspond to the dual nature of fairy-tale beasts (civilized/savage) does not explain why tenderness and aggression achieve exactly the same end. What child or adult has failed to register surprise when the faithless princess in "The Frog King" lives happily ever after with the young man whom she "dashed against the wall" in his enchanted state? "Now you'll get your rest, you nasty frog!" she shouts at him with seemingly irrepressible glee. Although some variant forms of this tale feature a princess who freely admits the frog to her chambers despite his repellent appearance and who thereby liberates him, others (and they are the most prominent) give us a princess who is perfectly capable of an act demanding cold-bloodedness even more chilling than the one depicted by the Grimms. In Scottish and Gallic versions of "The Frog King," the princess beheads her suitor. A Polish variant replaces the frog with a snake and recounts in lavish detail the princess's act of tearing the creature in two. A more tame, Lithuanian text requires the burning of the snake's skin before the prince is freed from his reptilian state.

From other folkloric sources it becomes evident that the reversal of a metamorphosis—the return from animal, vegetable, or mineral form to human shape—usually requires sacrifice. In some cases, as in the story of "Faithful Johannes," the hero must be prepared to sacrifice his son in order to release his servant from a state of petrifaction. In others, as in "The Golden Bird," the hero must summon up the courage to shoot a benevolent animal helper and to cut off its head and paws. The acts of violence embedded in various versions of "The Frog King" may, in their original form, have been motivated by compassion rather than hostility. The fairy-tale victim, or rather beneficiary, of an act of physical mutilation is forever indebted to the agent, who possesses the steely courage to carry out the forbidding deed. The very strength of the agent's passion or compassion endows him with the fortitude to execute the deed, however cruel it may seem. Tenderness and violence are virtually wedded in these tales. The princess in the Grimms' version of "The Frog King" may simply be displaying her spontaneous reaction to the unending importunities of a "disgusting frog" when she hurls him against the wall, but she may also have behind her act the weight of folkloric traditions that require an act of physical violence for love to flourish in its most human and humane form.[23]

In many tales of animal grooms, neither an act of love nor a deed of violence suffices to reverse the spell cast on a prince by a wicked witch or evil fairy. The heroine of the tale may actually live for some time with her animal husband—though it is said (perhaps for the sake of propriety) that he returns to his human shape at night—before she is obliged to undertake a redemptive journey for the sake of her husband. The journey is motivated by the bride's violation of a prohibition. That prohibition, no matter what form it takes, comes to constitute the didactic core of the tale type. If the heroine is barred from looking at her husband or must avoid letting light fall on him, her story is read as a reminder to restrain curiosity and to avoid excessive intimacy with one's husband. If the heroine fails to return from home to her husband after a prescribed period of time, her tale is read as a lesson in the hazards of inordinately strong attachments to parents. There may be a kernel of psychological truth in these interpretations, but they tend to single out only one link in the long chain of the plot's events. Broken promises and violated prohibitions, moreover, have a positive function in the logic of the fairy-tale narrative. Even when it must have been obvious that a broken word or the violation of a prohibition took the heroine one step further in the process of disenchanting her beloved, Wilhelm Grimm still slipped in adages about the importance of keeping promises. Rather than coming to terms with the absence of a moral order and the presence of repetitive narrative segments (e.g., prohibition/violation, command/fulfillment), he persisted in adding moral pronouncements even where there was no moral.

The most challenging question raised by animal-groom tales still remains to be answered. What accounts for the transformation of dashing young princes into beasts? A quick survey of bewitched husbands in the Grimms' collection reveals that they are predominantly ferocious beasts. Lions and bears are not uncommon consorts for fairy-tale heroines. Reptiles are also popular forms assumed by enchanted princes, and many a fairy-tale couple begins its courtship when a frog or snake accosts an unwary young girl. Other equally revolting forms of animal life emerge as heroes in the international class of animal grooms: pigs, hedgehogs, and donkeys all press themselves upon young, innocent girls. In sum, the menagerie of animal grooms displays impressive diversity, even if it is dominated by savage rather than tame beasts. Only rarely does the prince metamorphose into anything other than an animal. Stories recounting the transformation of young men into heads of massive proportions, into trees, and even into ovens constitute little more than exceptions to a widespread and pervasive rule.[24]

Fairy tales tell us precious little about the circumstances leading to the metamorphosis of men into animals. A "wicked fairy" of unspecified origin and motive weaves a spell over Perrault's Beast. In the Grimms' "The Lilting, Leaping Lark," the prince is in an enchanted state from the start. The tale of Snow White and Rose Red names a "wicked dwarf" as the culprit responsible for the transformation of a prince into a bear. In nearly every other tale recounting the wedding of a woman to an enchanted prince, an "old witch," a "wicked witch," or a "witch" plain and simple engineers the metamorphosis. Curiously, her motives remain unknown. The fairies, witches, and gnomes who set the plots of these tales in motion function as disembodied agents of evil who choose innocent male bystanders as targets for their magical spells.

It may well be that these sorceresses translate the metaphorical wisdom of old wives on sexuality ("men are beasts") into literal terms. Jan Öjvind Swahn has pointed out that "Beauty and the Beast" belongs to a tale type that developed "almost exclusively in a female milieu." That story and others like it may have been told by women to women in the context of covert reflections on maturity, marriage, and sexuality.[25] But it is also possible to see in these stories of beast marriages popular versions (what Hans Naumann has called "gesunkenes Kulturgut") of classical myths in which gods assume the form of beasts before displaying their amorous intentions. These myths in turn remind us that many primitive societies traced their origins to the union between a woman and a totem beast. In folktales as in myths, the humble female partner turns the head of the disguised deity or monarch through her physical attractiveness.

Stories like "Beauty and the Beast" may derive from classical myths and primitive beliefs, but they assuredly give us distinctly tame versions of them. The popular imagination succeeded in avoiding the theme of sodomy by transforming the mythical beast into an enchanted human. This process of civilization had gone so far by the time Charles Perrault appropriated the story for his collection that he could divest the transformation from beast to human of magic. Physical deformities may make Riquet à la Houppe (in the story of that title) look like a beast, but his other attributes are so winning that they inspire a love that transforms him from a hunchback into the handsomest of men. Here we are no longer in the realm of "fairy enchantment" (as Perrault makes clear), but in the sphere of psychological allegory.

If there is a secret message planted in fairy tales, it is inscribed in plain sight, right on the surface of each tale's events. Reading fairy tales requires us to set aside our preconceptions about the "lessons" imparted by specific tales. More often than not, these explicit lessons come from the pens of experts in the art of bowdlerizing fairy tales. Perrault, as we have seen, found Bluebeard's murders of less consequence than the curiosity of Bluebeard's wife about a forbidden chamber. He was perfectly prepared to read "Bluebeard" as a cautionary tale warning women against excessive curiosity. Those who trust the tale rather than its teller will quickly understand why Perrault and others were so anxious to single out curiosity as the principal subject of "Bluebeard." By highlighting the centrality of curiosity, Perrault succeeded in obscuring the connections between forbidden chambers and crimes of passion. It is hardly surprising that by the time the *Nursery and Household Tales* appeared, "Bluebeard" had branched off into two separate narratives: one a cautionary fairy tale about the hazards of curiosity, the other a folk tale depicting the triumph of a clever young woman over a bloodthirsty villain.

"Bluebeard," as we have seen, was easy to transform from a tale of high adventure charged with sexual meaning into a didactic story rehearsing the perils of curiosity or celebrating the power of craft. "Beauty and the Beast" may not have been converted into a cautionary tale by its many retellers, recorders, and rewriters, but it too has become domesticated over the centuries. Rather than taking a didactic turn, however, it has moved in the direction of sentimentalization. The theme of love's humanizing power has so overshadowed the link between sexuality and bestiality that few readers are shocked by the appearance of the animal groom. Still, the nervous insistence of various tellers on including mawkish speeches and on articulating banal messages does not drown out the deeper and more profound chords sounded by the tale's events. They resonate throughout the plot and can be silenced only through a stark reorchestration of the story line. Perrault, the Grimms, and others may have tampered with the tales they heard and failed to capture the authentic voice of the folk, but they only occasionally so distorted the plot of a tale that it was wholly deprived of its original meaning. Unintentionally perhaps, they preserved the deeper implications of the stories they recorded while making them suitable bedtime fare for children.